

Columbia Flier

Elkridge residents condemn proposed CSX railroad facility

Elected officials vow to 'do anything possible ... to stop this'

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About 165 Elkridge residents gathered at the community's volunteer fire department Thursday night to ask their elected officials to help them stop a proposed CSX Corp. railroad facility from being built in their neighborhood.

The elected officials, including Sen. Edward Kasemeyer, Del. James Malone, Del. Steve DeBoy and County Council member Courtney Watson, all Democrats, not only promised to help, but expressed opposition to the project equal to that of the residents.

"I can assure you that all of the representatives here are totally supportive of your position, and will do anything possible and anything conceivable to stop this," Kasemeyer said, to applause from the crowd.

CSX has identified four potential sites for the proposed facility, two in Howard, one in Anne Arundel and one in Prince George's County. The facility would be used to transfer large containers of consumer goods from trucks to trains for distribution throughout the country.

Thursday's standing-room-only meeting, organized by the Greater Elkridge Community Association, lasted more than two hours and included a slide presentation from the association and speeches from some of the officials, who also answered questions.

Signs stuck in the grass outside the fire department read, "Stop the CSX Intermodal NOW!!!"

Concerns from residents ran the gamut from pollution to noise to the site attracting "undesirable" people to the area.

Many residents said the facility, if built, would devalue their homes.

"It's a concern because we've lived in our home for 23 years, and the value of the house is going to be depreciated," said Jean Bertrand, who lives on Augustine Avenue.

Bertrand said her and her husband Jim, who was also at the meeting, are both retired and have considered downsizing into a smaller home or apartment in the future. The intermodal facility, she said, would "cut into the amount of equity we could get out of the house by selling it."

The Elkridge site also has worried members of the Howard County Board of Education, who are considering a nearby site for a proposed elementary school, as well as parents.

Nancy Pfeffer, the Parent Teacher Association president at Elkridge Elementary, who lives on Shipley Court near where the potential intermodal site is located, said at the meeting that she worries the intermodal will prevent the proposed school from being built, despite the fact that the area's existing schools are overcrowded.

"They're talking about all the great benefits that this will bring, but we can't take care of what we already have," she said.

If the school and the intermodal facility are both built, she will worry about "transient" people being near the school, she said.

The proposed rail facility would increase the efficiency of CSX's distribution system by allowing containers to be double-stacked on the trains, which cannot be done directly out of the existing Seagirt Marine Terminal, in Dundalk, because double-stacked trains cannot pass south out of Baltimore through the Howard Street Tunnel.

The train company's desire to increase its distribution capacity in Baltimore is due in part to the Panama Canal Authority's efforts to widen the canal there. That would allow container traffic from Asian countries, which currently enters the U.S. through the West Coast, to arrive directly in Baltimore, according to the Maryland Department of Transportation's website about the intermodal project.

The transportation department is involved in the project because of the potential impact on the state's economy, and because it probably will partially fund the project, officials there said. Because federal dollars will likely be used as well, perhaps through a grant to the state, the project also will have to conform to the National Environmental Policy Act, a federal law requiring public agencies to consider a variety of environmental factors when using federal funding for a project.

Because of the state involvement, residents peppered the officials at the meeting with questions on how they can use their influence to impede the process or its funding.

The officials did not have many clear-cut answers, citing mixed or noncommittal responses from MDOT and CSX.

"I can't tell you how many meetings I've had on this issue, trying to get the truth on what's going on," Malone said.

Kasemeyer called the intermodal facility a "David versus Goliath" situation between residents and CSX, and told residents he wants them to study the matter and supply him with "ammunition" with which to fight CSX.

"You're going to have to view us as your allies on this," he said of himself and the other officials.

Watson said she has offered to take legislators from all over Howard County on a tour of the neighborhoods surrounding the potential intermodal site, but that it was up to residents to convince those officials — including some on the County Council — why the site is inappropriate for the new facility.

DeBoy said he and the other legislators are "all on the same page," and that they will "fight this until there's no fight left."

At the meeting, many residents focused on the fact that CSX, through a subsidiary, has already purchased two pieces of property at the potential Elkridge intermodal site, which they said probably means CSX had already decided on building the intermodal in Elkridge.

Malone said he doesn't think CSX has decided on the Elkridge site, although other officials disagreed.

Robert Sullivan, a spokesman for CSX, said the railroad company purchased the two properties "to meet the specific need of two property owners there," and that "discussions are underway with property owners at the other sites" as well.

Sullivan also said that CSX "works very hard to be a good neighbor" in all the communities where it works, and that it would consider environmental and community concerns seriously at upcoming workshops it has planned and in the NEPA process at the federal level.

The meeting concluded with leaders of the community association urging their fellow residents to attend a CSX-organized workshop planned for 7 p.m. on April 27 at Elkridge Landing Middle School.

Representatives for County Executive Ken Ulman and U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin were also at the meeting. Cardin's representative said the senator opposes the project. Ulman's representative was noncommittal on the executive's position, which drew criticism from residents.